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WHITNEY'S INFLUENCE
ON THE
STUDY OF MODERN LANGUAGES AND ON
LEXICOGRAPHY.

By PROFESSOR FRANCIS ANDREW MARCH,
*Of Lafayette College, Easton, Pennsylvania, as Spokesman of the Modern Language
Association of America and of the Spelling Reform Association.*

OUR great Sanskrit scholar was also an instructor in modern languages at Yale during almost all of his active life. He taught great classes of undergraduates French and German for thirty years. He daily gave them his morning hour. He prepared a German grammar, a French grammar, a German reader with notes and vocabulary, a German dictionary, and also an English grammar, all for practical use in schools and colleges. These books are believed to be the most widely used of their kind, and are everywhere prized by superior teachers.

All are remarkable books. Professor Whitney was an exact observer, but he was by eminence a systematizer. He had a profound system of language, its origin, its essential elements, its development, its differentiation into families of languages, and in the Indo-European family the differentiation of the languages. A linguistic phenomenon was no fact to him till he saw it in its historic development; a fact was no truth to

him till he saw it in its systematic necessity. Any one of his books was in some sense exposition or explanation of this system.

“The Essentials of English Grammar” is his most perfect work of this kind. It seems to be a statement of simple facts in the simplest language, made with charming ease and fluency; but it is an organic unity, — the same blood flows and forms in every sentence and every word. It is a masterly portrait of the youngest sister of the Indo-European family. The German and French grammars are similar sketches of her French and German sisters. Professor Whitney had chosen betimes the eldest of this sisterhood. He had his earlier fancies, lightly turned to the beauty of minerals, of plants, of birds; but he married betimes, as the scholar should, and when he married Sanskrit, he married into the family. When his students sought the acquaintance of the younger sisters, he liked to introduce them to the head of the sisterhood. The press has teemed with American English grammars ever since Lindley Murray, many of them brilliant with original nomenclature, diagrams, and other novelties. Professor Whitney’s “Essentials” shows that simplicity and lucidity are better than brilliancy. It makes the study of grammar an effort to understand language, elementary grammar an exposition of facts by principles. It shows no fads of methods. It has no special relations with any of the current text-books. It is an original growth from fundamental truth, and might have been written in any age when the fundamental truths were known, and it is and will be as good for one age as another. This is the

kind of book Professor Whitney liked to write, not a repetition or refutation of the latest views, but exposition of truth for all time. In the higher study of modern languages his example strongly favors direct study of languages in monuments and literatures rather than in the opinions of others.

A similar excellence belongs to his work in lexicography. It began in systematizing and simplifying the definitions of Webster's Dictionary, and in contributing material to the St. Petersburg Sanskrit Dictionary. It was continued in the planning and direction of his German Dictionary, and finally of the Century Dictionary, which is a sort of apotheosis of Webster. In his superintendency of the Century he was able to do a great work for the historical and scientific study of English by adopting plans for introducing into the dictionary most liberally the results of such studies, and materials for further advance. Perhaps no other editor-in-chief could have secured the adoption of Dr. Scott's plan for the etymology. Its thoroughness and comprehensiveness foreboded a voluminousness appalling to a publisher. But the publisher of the Century was no common publisher, and Professor Whitney's authority was little short of a categorical imperative. He supported Dr. Scott, who prepared the etymology and most of the philological material from the modern languages, not only by general approval, but by constant interest and cordial recognition day by day of the eminent merit of his work.

In the Century another form of Whitney's power appears, — a genius for amending, improving, recon-

structing, especially in semi-mechanical contrivances, a genius like that of Franklin. There are in his earlier vocabularies notable contrivances of method, order, and typography, for conveying in simple ways information about etymology and the like. In the Century there are many ingenious devices of arrangement and notation especially to indicate pronunciation. Those are of special importance which give the pronunciation of letters of varying sound. He also makes an onslaught on the irregularities and inconsistencies of English spelling.

In his work upon Sanskrit, studying old manuscripts, observing, systematizing, expounding ancient speeches, he would be apt to think of language as record merely. But in dealing with modern languages and especially with the lexicography of English, he could not fail to recognize it as machinery, — mighty machinery working for the future. He would pride himself on the conquest of the past, the reconstruction of history in his exposition of Sanskrit; but his English lexicography would remind him that the highest praise of a branch of knowledge is that it is fruitful, that “we seek truth for generation, fruit, and comfort.” His linguistic philosophy also, his view of words as inventions, of each language as an aggregation of these inventions, a national institution, and of the science of language as a branch of human history, made it a matter of course that he should regard language as a field for improvements, like other inventions and institutions.

Professor Whitney had already, in 1867, in his lectures on Language and the Study of Language, and in a

series of papers in "The Nation," stated fully the scientific aspect of our spelling, and the unhappy position of those who defend it, and love it, and are proud of it. There were some such in those days. I will not read what he says of them, lest haply there may be some survivor of that period present, too old to learn, too venerable to be ridiculed on this occasion. But as to practical action, Professor Whitney announced at that time that it was impracticable while the public temper should remain what it then was.

In 1875, however, he accepted the Chairmanship of a Committee of the American Philological Association, which was appointed to report what could be done for English spelling, and he prepared the report¹ which was presented in 1876, setting forth the principles which should govern any attempt at reform. He wrote the same year to the International Convention for the Improvement of English Orthography held at Philadelphia at the World's Fair: "There are few in our community deserving the name of scholar who do not confess that a 'historical' spelling is in principle indefensible, that it has no support save our customs and prejudices." He still declined to make any suggestions for a new orthographic method, although he said that he had been sometimes tempted to say that he should not think any progress of much account until we could agitate for the true ("Continental" or "Italian") representation of the vowel sounds. But he was for "a beginning anywhere, of any kind. Break down the false sacredness of the present modes of spelling, accustom

¹ See below, Bibliography, No. 208a.

people not to shiver when they see familiar words ‘ misspelt,’ and something good will be the final result.”

He accepted office in the Spelling Reform Association. The names of Professor Whitney and Professor Max Müller stood side by side. He continued a member of the Committee on Spelling Reform of the Philological Association. Holding these offices for twenty years, he exerted the full weight of his influence and authority in behalf of this reform. He freely gave it time and money. He attended meetings. He would make a long journey in a midwinter storm to attend a meeting of the Committee. He contributed in his turn to a series of articles in reformed spelling, published in “The Independent.” He signed memorials to Congress. He acted as a Commissioner of the State of Connecticut to examine and report on amending the spelling of the public documents. He promoted and assisted joint action between the American Philological Association and the Philological Society of England. He introduced this action in the Century Dictionary.

His last public act, almost his last publication, was a communication to the Anthropological Society of Washington in 1893, for a symposium on the question: “Is simplified spelling feasible as proposed by the English and American Philological Societies?”

But with all this he declined to lead. When he signed a memorial he would make it a condition that his name should not be placed first. He did not use in his own books any form of amended spelling. In giving the pronunciation of the Century Dictionary, he did not adopt the Continental vowel notation, though

he used it in his studies, and regarded it as vital for reform. He weighed the matter well, and decided that it would too much endanger the popular success of the whole undertaking. We must reserve that, he said, for a future edition. In all this, as in other things, Professor Whitney was eminently the wise man.

Many men of many minds are needed to advance reforms. The good providence which sends rain on the wise and on the unwise has its crowns reserved for both. The great emperor had a medal for the soldier with the thickest head and the stoutest heart in his army. So it is in the army of progress. Other spelling reformers may take their medals; Professor Whitney is sure of his crown.